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Diary of a Failed Pilgrim June 2014

The roots of giant oak trees rose up to grab me, and the rocks seemed determined to block my path as I scrambled down the slippery, muddy trail to a little creek. Mosquitos bit the back of my neck. What was I doing here in the middle of the French wilderness, “walking” the Camino de Santiago from Le Puy to Conques? Why do they call it a walk? It is a strenuous hike...not just one, but day after day after day after day. On my own pilgrimage along the route, I was exhausted. My toes were crushing each other and every step was torture. Every tiny village was either at the bottom of a steep, craggy mountain or at the top of a hill. Either way, it was a daily scramble up or down. All the books, blogs, films, and friends who came before me didn't prepare me for this. They call it “walking the Camino” but it is walking, hiking, climbing, scrambling, limping...

We never made it to our goal. I turned back, gave up. So, now, I'm writing my Camino diary of failure—the diary of a pilgrim who failed on the Camino de Santiago. It's also the story of a more meaningful urban pilgrimage which I would not have recognized had I succeeded on the “real” pilgrimage of the Camino.

Failure shames a person. Recognition of failure carries a harsh stigma, and those who fail publically are blood in the water. Our society



is obsessed with success, and that obsession leads us to value it above most other aspects of life and to paint pictures of ourselves as great successes...from our LinkedIn profiles, to our Facebook pages, to how we tell our stories. It encourages us to lie to protect ourselves. So, when it appears that we have failed, we tend to fudge the truth, assign blame, or turn our failure into a story of success. But I can't bring myself to do that here. This is not a victorious story of how success can be born of failure, through perseverance, courage and creativity. Mine is not even a story of how, through failure, we can unintentionally stumble upon something better, something positive. Those are wonderful, inspiring and true stories, but unfortunately, not mine. No, mine is a story of how failure and success can be both one and the same. As Bob Dylan said, "There's no success like failure, and failure is no success at all." This diary of my failed pilgrimage is my attempt to tell that story.

My Camino Ideas

All along, I was afraid I might not be able to make it—certainly not to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain, the historic goal for most pilgrims who walk the Camino. But I so wanted to be a pilgrim. I wanted to make it to a holy place, a place of significance that was meaningful, if only to me. So, I forged ahead, planning, packing, reading, talking, meeting, learning French, checking blog after blog, trying to figure out how I could walk the 200 kilometers from Le Puy to Conques, in the summer of 2013. Mine was a pilgrimage “lite”—most pilgrims walk 800 or more kilometers to the shrine. I couldn’t take that much time and my vision was poor and getting worse. I would need a traveling companion, and no one I knew could take so much time to walk with me. I thought that was okay because many walk the Camino in stages, during vacations each year. About a year ago, two dear friends returned ecstatic and glowing from traveling by foot along the GR 65, a portion of the Camino in France. Their pictures showed spectacular landscapes, ancient stone structures revealing thousands of years of history, silent, simple villages, smiling pilgrim faces. Right then and there, my friends’ radiance and enthusiasm, their stunning photos, planted the idea of a new challenge to see such beauty before I went completely blind. It would provide a chance to come in from the cold of my personal exile, created as my world had darkened and shrunk. This idea connected with a long-held desire of mine to walk or bike from village to village in Europe, staying in little inns, slowing down, soaking in beauty and quiet. I like backpacking and the self-confident, self-sufficient feeling that comes with being able to carry everything I need on my back. Although I had an acute panicky feeling that I wouldn’t be so self-sufficient much longer, I also love a physical challenge—I’ve only backpacked for a few days at a time, and this would be a more extended, more dangerous, and better, adventure. I love to set goals and reach

them. I wanted to achieve something meaningful, though I didn't quite know what it was. I love being in nature; I love the French countryside. I love everything French. This pilgrimage would be perfect.

I liked the idea of stepping into a complex and layered Celtic, Roman, and Gallic history, walking in the footsteps of thousands who followed the same path since the 7th century and before. I liked Goethe's idea that "Europe was created along the pilgrimage roads to Santiago" He recognized that although they spoke different languages and came from across the entire continent, millions mingled with and aided people much like themselves along the Camino for centuries, recognizing their shared humanity. Indeed the Camino united many of the peoples of Europe peacefully for the first time in history. It has the same name in most European languages: the Camino de Santiago, the Chemins de Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle, Der Jakobsweg, the Way of Saint James. Now, after a long period of obscurity in an increasingly secular Europe, "The Way," as it is often called, attracts tens of thousands of walkers, hikers, and bikers each year from starting points all across the continent.

By the time I left for France, I was prepared. I had the "lightest" version of everything one might need. I had a camelback water bladder that I could drink from when thirsty, like the characters in *Dune* on the planet Arrakis which had no water (they were recycling their pee...I was sipping fresh spring water from village wells). I had the best shoes, checked and rechecked by Cyrus, the local shoe guru. I had a whistle to scare off wolves. I called on all my resources and was encircled and encouraged by family and friends. One patiently drove me to REI for endless searches of items that I would need. Another ordered the exact books that I needed to navigate the Camino and to find places to stay along the way, giving me her itinerary with phone numbers and tips. Yet another hiked with me in preparation for the journey ahead. Another

friend volunteered to be my seeing-eye companion for two weeks. I practiced walking with my pack full. I was half-way through French 1 on my iPod. I had spent hundreds of dollars in preparation. I was ready to be a pilgrim!

My Camino Reality

The “Camino” is no ordinary hike. It is more than a personal journey. Those who walk it become part of a particular and important slice of history. The Camino de Santiago is imbued with religious (Roman Catholic) myth, mystery, and history. Following old Roman trade routes, themselves built over grooved Celtic and even more ancient roads, the Camino de Santiago was one of the most important Christian pilgrimages in the medieval period. Back then, if you “walked” the Camino to the tippy top of Spain, reaching the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, you could earn indulgences that would keep you out of hell. That tradition has morphed into a modern form of indulgence: today, few worry about staying out of hell, but we now crave symbols of success. Those who can hike all the way to the cathedral can earn a certificate that proclaims that they have succeeded—they will not descend into the modern hell of failure—at least not in this endeavor.

Not just anyone walks the Way of St. James, or, for short, the weighty and auspicious-sounding “The Way.” I think, that most, of those who do it today, many have modern spiritual or personal motives such as psychological healing, or finding answers to existential questions, motives that have replaced the historically religious reasons for becoming a pilgrim on The Way. Many Roman Catholics still make the ancient pilgrimage, but over the centuries, wars of religion and the drive toward secularization in Europe shifted those motivations. Now, many of those walking The Way are seeking to succeed in a physical challenge, a challenge of personal growth, perhaps just slow enjoyment

of some of the most beautiful scenery on earth, or the joy of visiting historical sights and lovely villages. I would think that most modern pilgrims' motives are mixed.

This is definitely not a walk in the park. The Way is supposed to be difficult. Historically the pilgrimage was, for many, an act of penance. In addition to those who chose to make this pilgrimage as an act of devotion, criminals were forced to walk The Way in chains, removed only when they reached the cathedral or died along the road. Some went the entire Way on their knees. I soon realized that the harshness of the Way was deliberate. Though there are many stretches of easy walking, the Camino is more demanding than the pleasant hiking paths and trails that intersect it, though both go in the same direction. Its difficulty is intended to purify the pilgrims' soul and strip down to that which is really important, leaving the extraneous behind. Walking The Way was historically a form of punishing religious self-flagellation meant to cleanse and clarify. Perhaps for that reason, there has been little effort to make it easier for us modern folks. For me, I began to see that walking the Camino was a particularly punishing way to satisfy a spiritual quest, an impulse to commune with nature and history, to connect with others, and a desire for physical activity or to see natural beauty for perhaps the last time. The original "guidebook" written for pilgrims in the 12th century has the following to say:

The pilgrim route is narrow because the road that leads to everlasting life is narrow...the pilgrim route thwarts the body, increases virtues, and offers pardon for sins, a separation from Hell, and the protection of the heavens. It is the road of the righteous. It takes us away from luscious foods, it makes gluttonous fatness vanish, it restrains voluptuousness, constrains the appetites of the flesh which attack the fortress of the soul, cleanses the spirit, leads

us to contemplation, humbles the haughty, raises up the lowly, loves poverty. It hates the reproach of those fuelled by greed. It loves, on the other hand, the person who gives to the poor. It rewards those who live simply and do good works.

This is what the Camino does today, more or less. It thwarts the body, takes the pilgrim away from “luscious” foods (wine seems to flow freely and the simple food is usually quite good), and most who walk long enough find that their “gluttonous fatness” vanishes. The Camino still “loves poverty”—simplicity might be a better word today: walking The Way costs very little, and many do it to get away from the consumerism that threatens to consume us. They do get away from it for sure: pilgrims’ needs along the way are basic. Unless they stop only at five-star hotels—which are few and far between (I certainly didn’t see one)—most live modestly along the pilgrimage. Just as the ancient pope’s “guidebook” describes, pilgrims are good to one another: there is much sharing, little theft and hearty comradery.

Sometimes the wisdom of The Way is spectacularly evident: the most difficult path can lead to the most beautiful experience. I have never seen such marvelous landscapes, such dark luscious forests, such clear, cool, cascading waterfalls. I have heard that the Le Puy route is the most beautiful French route on the Camino. The dense forests are covered with thick moss of an emerald color I’ve only seen in HD 3D animated films! Cuckoos and other birds call to each other in tones that sound like words of love and pain. The trees and foliage are so thick that we could not hear when we called out to each other. Furrowed dirt roads led through farmland and pastures, where cows and horses grazed contentedly. Now and then there is an ancient church or chapel where you can duck in and cool off. I would get out of my backpack and lie on the pews to rest my back and let the sweat

dry. I would feel glad to be alive, glad to be in my body, glad to be in such natural beauty.

I will be eternally grateful for my sturdy boots...the trails were ancient, rocky, and rutted, and I was warned by those who went before me that good shoes are essential. Some of the paths were simply stream beds, with creeks still running through them. We saw dolmans—the megalithic tombs that looked like the miniature versions of Stonehenge. In the fields, we saw ancient round stone shepherd huts and flowers everywhere. I was painfully aware that we were typical Americans, on a mission to “get there” as quickly and efficiently as possible. I marveled at the elderly French people out there walking the trails that intersected the Camino, as if on a leisurely stroll, stopping often to take in all the treats for all the senses and to have a lovely picnic lunch. They didn’t bother with the difficult trails.

As thirsty as I was to drink in the beauty as I walked, I couldn’t help thinking about the Camino as a paradox of power, ideology, and freedom. I liked the idea that now I could hike with people from all over the world, surely a benefit of globalization and the European Union which—ironically—both emerged primarily to satisfy the rapacious interests of a corporate elite, hungry to expand the “free market.” Although the Camino ideology embraces a kind of “poverty” in its enforcement of simplicity, those who have the time to hike it and can afford the necessary gear are certainly not poor. This modern truth harks back to the ancient one: from the 7th to the 16th centuries, the Camino was one of the very few avenues of freedom to travel and therefore to mingle with other like-minded people, but only because it was created and sanctioned by the iron hand of the powerful Roman Catholic Church. Certainly it was in the interest of the Church to create an ideology that ennobled poverty and simplicity while Bishops, Cardinals, and Popes were busy amassing vast fortunes, and sending Jews, Protestants, and Muslims to their deaths.



Still, the small Romanesque churches were beautiful and proud. When I entered, I really felt that God was there. Despite the beauty and the calm and welcoming spirit of their chapels, I knew that by 1789, the oppression of the church and the nobility supporting it was more than most people could bear. Indeed, many of those beautiful chapels were torn down by angry French revolutionary peasants, joyful in their freedom from the coercion, cruelty, and tyranny that the church had meted out with its extraction of tribute and threats of damnation. I knew that those peasants, believing that they were forever free from tyranny, had built their own houses from the stones of those churches, and that some of those stones had once been Roman roads and aqueducts destroyed by the Gauls. Walking through tiny, silent villages, I looked at those stones, wondering what they had experienced throughout the centuries, defying the forces of modernity since the French Revolution and before.

I thought about how this free and peaceful land I was hiking through was soaked with blood: from Julius Caesar's Conquest of Gaul to the Roman Catholic attempt to exterminate Protestant Huguenots in the 16th century, and two world wars of the 20th century, this gorgeous land had known thousands of years of pure misery. People bred as cannon fodder. Millions speared to death or burned alive. Caesar actually kept body counts in his memoirs—which I'm now reading. The rule in his day was to burn your village before the enemy could get to it. Anyone not killed would be tortured, raped, or enslaved. Protestant churches were torn down almost as fast as they were built. Louis XIV terrorized those who had renounced the Catholic Church by billeting soldiers in their homes and ordering them to tear up the furniture and abuse the occupants unless they fled France or converted back to Catholicism. Now, there is little trace left of that horror, but the blood that was shed in the twentieth century isn't even dry. Every village, no matter how tiny, has a monument to the resistance fighters killed by the Nazis. Many have monuments to Jews deported to the death camps by the Vichy government or the German occupiers.

We walked, hiked, climbed, and scrambled for hours and hours a day. By the fifth or sixth day, my feet hurt with every step, my back ached under the weight of my pack. At my lowest moments I waxed histrionic: I had visions of being on a death march. I imagined that I would be one of the few who could make it and live, and that melodramatic thought kept me going. Unlike the hungry, barefooted, abused prisoners on those all-too-real Death Marches, I had my fancy boots, my orthotics, good weather, joyful pleasure in the beautiful scenery, water, food, shelter, and rest stops. I thought to myself: how could I really be suffering?

When we found a village where we could stay, I sat down exhausted in the middle of town (hard to know where that was exactly—often

on the edge of town) and asked my seeing-eye companion to find us a place to stay...any place at all where I could take off my shoes, my toxic socks and sweat-soaked clothes, shower, and rest. We didn't stay in gites (pilgrims' hostels)...I didn't think that I could keep track of my things in a dark dorm room filled with an orchestra of snoring people. We stayed in little bed and breakfasts. Most looked like bordellos—fake flower pots and faded silk flowers everywhere (even decorating the radiators), well-worn and cushy red and pink velvet pillows, rooms crammed with knickknacks, mismatched sheets and flowered beadspreads, lilac and purple walls and frilly curtains. Each day, after the long hike, I would shower and immediately lie down to sleep, only waking up for dinner and sleeping again. In my exhausted state, it was hard to carry on the obligatory conversation with hosts and guests at the dinner table. When I finally staggered off to bed again, the mattress was often lumpy but it didn't matter... every morning I seemed to wake refreshed and ready to hike again. Each day I started out happy and energetic. I could have gone on, but when my seeing-eye traveling companion bailed out, I lost my confidence. I didn't trust my eyes. I recalled that sometimes I had missed the signs along the way...once we were separated and I got lost, blowing my wolf whistle to no avail, and everyone on the trail was looking for me. Another time, we both got lost because we had missed the trail marker. I admired those solitary pilgrims who walked the entire way alone.

The Return as the Pilgrimage

Pilgrim stories rarely describe the return journey. For me, the return was my real pilgrimage. We were far from public transportation. We walked far to find a train station, only to find that there had been a train strike. We walked on to find a bus to take us to a train which took us to another

bus and then another train. Now the journey became a pilgrimage of a different kind; a modern one, with poor people, frustrated commuters, and uncomfortable, crying babies, and the same discomfort—this time not a choice—not a pilgrimage I was really prepared for. I watched Vichy, France go by through a dirty train window. I thought about one of my favorite novels, *Suite Française*, written by a French Jew who was eventually sent to die in the death camps. The novel takes place in occupied France and explores the complicated relationships between the German occupiers—some nice, well-raised, polite boys and some not so nice—and the French villagers whose men were in German prison camps. As I watched through the window, I thought of how complicated it was when basic human relationships are caught in historical events—or just unwanted pilgrimages because of transit strikes. How could I really be irritated by a few crying babies or musky-smelling commuters pushing up against me? They didn't choose this modern pilgrimage—this was their daily life—but they were just as miserable as the 12th century guidebook exhorted pilgrims to be—no food at all, much less “luscious” food, no seats for most, travelers tired to the bone after a hard day's work; all of us just wanting to get home—not exactly a destination but a lovely spiritual goal, really. None of us thought of reaching that goal as “success,” and we certainly wouldn't get a certificate for it. Like pilgrims on the Camino, travelers were good to each other—joking about our common fate, giving up seats to the moms and the most tired, sharing a bit of fruit, the “haughty” and the “lowly” on the same pilgrimage, kids just adapting as best they could, smashed together for hours. After three punishing days of travel on foot, by train, and by bus, we arrived in Paris-Bercy, hungry, tired, and smelly, glad to be there finally—only to face a subway strike and again, hours and miles of walking until we finally reached home.



Some Thoughts

I've failed at few projects in my life that I set out to accomplish, and so I wasn't ready for the sadness I felt about not making it all the way on the Camino de Santiago. Normally I think I am brave, but because of the social and economic costs of failure, I'm cautious as well. I rarely let fear stop me from forging ahead, once I've set out. I was glad we stopped and went back—just to have the real pilgrimage experience of the trip back home.

Failure, after all, is just a feeling. I am not a typical Camino “pilgrim” who smugly elevates the experience to appear apart from those who don't walk The Way. I confess that I don't have an overt spiritual agenda, and I don't really have a larger goal. But in fact, we are all pilgrims, as the way home taught me. Getting home—a sacred secular space—can be a pilgrimage in itself. It was a challenge to get through the hard parts, so why not recognize these everyday challenges, too, as something special?

The Camino—both the personal and the historical—is full of paradoxes. Beautiful, Monet-like landscapes, gentle rolling hills, breathtaking hiking trails across land where thousands and thousands have been murdered, spiked, raped, and disfigured. For me, even as a failure, it meant the surprising discovery of the return as a pilgrimage. As a Buddhist, I'm drawn to non-dualism...where pleasure and pain, praise and blame, loss and gain, obscurity and fame, seem to be opposites, but when more closely observed, are one and the same. We seek one and run from the other, wasting our energy when we could just take what comes and know it's all the pilgrimage. We boldly walk the Camino, enduring aching feet, but shun the pain of being squished in with our fellow humans in trains and busses. What is the difference, really? Isn't the goal—arriving home where we find love, comfort, and spiritual solace—the most blessed one?

The paradox of pleasure and pain were always with me on the Camino, and sometimes I could not distinguish them from one another. There is no one to blame for not reaching the planned goal, and there is no praise for getting as far as I did or just making it home. I wasn't a success on the Camino, but I wasn't a failure either, because both descriptions probably miss the point, no matter what I feel. It is probably a cliché to say that the Camino is a good metaphor for life itself...never boring, with lush, lovely, but difficult and steep, rocky parts, roots reaching up, threatening to trip, muddy bogs to slog through, uphill battles, smooth beautiful parts, detours, disappointments, packed in against other people and tired children, exhaustion, exhilaration, rest, strangely renewed energy for the next day, and whatever comes.